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ABSTRACT

A case study of a novice poet based on six interviews reveals significant differences in the writing processes of beginning and experienced poets. While the novice's unfamiliarity with other poets' work or methods of working and his own practice of writing only when he spontaneously finds himself in a certain mood distinguished him as a beginner, the sharpest contrast between the beginner and more experienced poets appeared in his revising practices. Research indicates that experienced poets are extensive revisers, but this poet generally altered little in his drafts. The private nature of his real audience--himself and an occasional friend--influenced his writing, persuading him that he did not need to revise as much as he would if he had a wider audience. He considered his poem complete when he felt that he had expressed what he wanted. He also insisted, however, that a poem must look and sound like a poem, indicating that he applied an aesthetic sensibility to his work. He seemed to be caught between the goals of expressive and transactional writing and those of poetic discourse, which demand that the poet treat the work as an artifact, as something different from self-expression or interpersonal communication. To develop as poets, beginners must begin to write not simply for themselves, but also for an audience of other poets. (MM)

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A PROCESS PERSPECTIVE ON POETIC DISCOURSE

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Panel: Laying Back Discourse Categories: Research in Southern California

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A Process Perspective on Poetic Discourse

During the next fifteen minutes I'll discuss some of my research into the composing processes of poets. The work I'll report on today is a case study of a novice poet, a college sophomore named Gary who writes quite seriously on his own but has never taken a creative writing course and, in fact, doesn't want to. There will be time only to highlight some of the findings as it's a large study characterizing Gary's work habits, attitudes about writing, composing and revising processes and sense of audience. After describing some of the background to the study and explaining its design, I'll give a brief overview of Gary's work habits and his own sense of his writing process; then I'll focus on his revising behaviors and sense of audience.

One of the guiding questions of the study was "how is a novice poet like and different from an experienced poet?" I wanted to find out what could be discovered about the processes of writing poetry -- about how poems begin, are composed and revised -- by looking carefully at one poet's behaviors, in this case at a poet whose abilities have developed virtually on his own, that is, without the benefit or hinderence of instruction or response from other writers.

Information about <u>experienced</u> poets processes can be gathered from interviews with poets, from essays by poets about their own work or about the art of poetry writing, from manuscript studies which can be used to track writers' revising moves and from creative process research. In terms of composing process study,

poetry is so far the least investigated of discourse types. Recently, Mimi Schwartz compared the writing of several kinds of discourse including lyric poetry, I conducted a study which looked at patterns in the working drafts of six poets, several researchers interested in other aspects of writing have asked the participants in their studies to write poems; however, most of the ways to study poetry that Gabriel Della-Piana outlined a few years ago have yet to be explored.

To study Gary's processes I met with him for hour-long interviews six times during a ten-week quarter. After compiling his writing history, we concentrated on individual poems. Because I was interested in self-initiated writing, I didn't ask Gary to write anything specifically for the study but to bring in drafts and final versions of poems he did write during the quarter and of poems he'd written recently. Each time we met I asked him questions such as these: can you tell me about the starting of this poem? can you describe how you went about writing it? is there anything in it you would still like to work on? can you tell me about the changes you made? what do you feel good about in this poem? how does it compare to your other ones? The interview transcripts and the drafts themselves gave me material from which to sketch out a portrait of Gary as a poet.

All of Gary's poetry has been written outside of school. He's wary of English classes generally because in high school he found he could do well without having to give his work much thought. He's particularly wary of creative writing courses because he's afraid his originality will be stifled. I'll return to Gary's concept of

originality later as it seems to be central and inhibiting to his development as a writer.

When I asked Gary how much he writes, he answered without hesitation: "I just write when I'm inspired to write...I don't think I could make a living writing poems." Since his writing depends on his mood, he has no schedule nor has he a particular place in which to work; but certain conditions are more conducive to his writing than others. He said he writes best at night or when no one else in in the house. He prefers to use "a fine felt tipped pen" and said he could never write at a typewriter or in the library. He considers such preferences to be signs of his lack of expertise as a writer: "A real, accomplished poet," he said, "would be able to write anywhere...at MacDonalds, on a napkin."

However, Gary has little familiarity with more accomplished poets either through personal acquaintance or through reading. The one poet he could remember reading in school was e.e.cummings, whom he liked. While he was in the Army he read translations of Japanese poems and he has read such writers as Richard Bach and Hugh Prather. Interestingly, the influence of the reading he <u>has</u> done can be seen in his work.

Although Gary waits to be in the mood for writing it is not as if he composes a poem without effort, all at once. Usually he spends a much shorter time than would a more experienced poet working to complete a poem, often finishing a final version in one sitting; but he writes carefully and views his process as one of

crafting. He described it in this way:

> It's like when an Eskimo is a master craftsman. He'll meditate on the rock or whatever it is he's using and when he feels he has seen into it...the way they describe it is there's a little figure inside already there, so what he's doing is getting rid of the extraneous stuff so that this little figure can come out. Well, that's the same thing I'm doing with my poetry... It's a process of quieting my mind so that my feelings can speak...you translate (them) into words...It's very difficult for me finding the words...

Sometimes, if he can't think of an accurate word he leaves a blank or puts in another word so as to not get frustrated and risk confusing feelings of frustration with those he's trying to write about. Leaving a blank, he said, feels like cheating.

I think even this brief account of some of Gary's work habits and sense of his process will indicate qualities that distinguish him as a novice. He is unfamiliar with other poets' work or methods of working. He doesn't know that accomplished poets have at least as many preferences as he has for where and with what materials to write, nor that experienced poets have at least as much difficulty as he has finding the right words, or making a living writing poems, for that matter. He is not a working writer, nor does he think of himself as one. He writes only when he's in a certain mood and does nothing to encourage this mood to arise.

The sharpest contrast between Gary and more experienced poets,

however, appears in his revising practice. All of the experienced poets in my earlier study are extensive revisers. Without exception their manuscripts show massive reworkings. Gary's drafts usually contain only single word or line changes. Some of the poems were not revised at all, at least not on the page.

Yet although Gary does little revising, he does have definite reasons for whatever changes he makes and definite standards he applies to improving a poem, even though he is often unable to articulate these standards in an adaquate critical language. "A poem," he said, "is a carving out of the way I felt. If it were in prose it'd be 'I was feeling bad today'; it'd be narration...I wouldn't sort out what was coming to my mind. In a poem you have to pick and choose." Gary defines a poem in this way:

> To be a poem it has to look like a poem; it has to sound like a poem; it has to have images and it has to be an original creation of the person that's writing it.

While some of Gary's revisions are prompted by a clear set of assumptions about word choice, they often do not appear to acheive his own stated purposes. To make what he described as "clearer images" Gary altered some lines in ways that seemed to me, and to the other readers who looked at the drafts, to have not affected the images at all. In one case it appeared that there were no images in the lines at all. At other times he is able to revise in accordance with his standards, but his standards are not always very high: "In general, when I do a poem," he said, "I like to start out with something real catching and then put all the filler

in the middle and have a real strong, solid ending."

The picture that emerges of Gary's revising process is a curious one. While the manuscripts indicate a limited and often ineffectual pattern of revision, the transcripts demonstrate the extent to which Gary's decisions about revising are not arbitrary but come from complex cognitive strategies -- from his ideas about composing and from his own standards for poetry writing. On the surface what Gary says about poetry, his definition of a poem as something that looks and sounds like one and that has imagery and originality, is not so different from what a more experienced poet might say. But on another level these statements warrant closer examination. His concept of originality, for example, takes only the writer's rather than the reader's point of view, a perspective which may be said to typify his revising process. For Gary, the poem need not strike another reader as original but must be original to the writer. It seems that if he feels his poem embodies an original concept, he views it this way when he rereads it. He does not seem able to look at the poem apart from his own feelings about it, for what may most accurately define Gary as a novice rather than an advanced writer of poetry is the degree to which he does not recognize his work as being in need of further revision. Moreover, his writing performance is constrained by a sense of audience which itself limits his need to revise.

Gary says that his main purpose in writing is to express himself; he writes poems for himself and sometimes for friends. In discussing a poem he'd written for a friend, Gary remarked that he would have to change one of the verses if he were to try to have

it published; he'd want other people to understand it and so he'd have to make it less personal. In another poem, the language wasn't precise enough. He said:

> This way is fine for personal communication...but if I was going to take it out for publication or something I'd change (this line); I don't like 'cry of a unicorn.' Unicorns don't cry. I have an image of the kind of word I want; it's a word like the sound of a group of horses that have just passed. I don't have the word yet.

Although his poems are written for himself or for people he knows well, Gary also described his sense of a more generalized reader:

> I imagine the person...is intelligent for one thing... and I usually use myself as a guinea pig. If it makes sense to me then it's ok. If I can understand it anyone can...It's externalizing myself as a reader of poetry, trying to figure out if it applies to other people.

The private nature of Gary's real audience influences his writing in that he doesn't need to revise as much as he feels he would had he a wider readership. It's harder to reconstruct Gary's mental picture of audience, but his real readership is certainly significant to it. This readership does not include other poets, writing instructors or people he doesn't know well. In "externalizing" himself "as a reader of poetry" there's a curious sense

in which he must fall back on himself quite literally as a reader of his own poetry, using as standards for judging his work, mostly his own, subjective experience of it.

For me the most striking feature of this characterization of Gary as a poet is that all of his behaviors in writing are appropriate to his purposes. He does not revise more extensively because both his critical judgment and his sense of audience do not compel him to do so. Gary considers his poems complete when he has satisfied himself that he has expressed a feeling or when he has in some way communicated to someone he knows. But at the same time Gary insists that a poem must sound and look like a poem, indicating an aesthetic sensibility that he applies to his work, something different from his standards for self-expression or communication.

In much of his work it seems that Gary is caught between these two kinds of goals for his writing, between the goals of expressive and transactional discourse on the one hand, and those of poetic discourse on the other. Poetic writing demands that the writer treat the work as artifact, as something different from self-expression or interpersonal communication -- a demand, which at least in the case of lyric poetry, causes the writer to compose with a divided consciousness. If, as Robert Graves said, "every lyric poem is written for only one person," a lyric by an experienced poet seems to be written also with the understanding that a much larger audience may overhear it. If poetry is an expression of inner feelings, it is also the most precisely crafted form of writing: while expressing themselves, poets must also attend to

their writing as works of art.

The standards experienced poets apply to their work are those of a community of poets of which the writer is a part of wishes to be a part. As Gary neither reads other poetry nor knows other poets, his standards of critical judgment are entirely his own. But even at this point in his development as a poet, Gary's attention to the look of the poem on the page, to the "poetic sound" of the words, and his interest in making his poetry concise indicate some of the ways in which his writing does have the goals of poetic discourse. It seems that along with his private audience, Gary will need to begin writing for an audience of other poets as well, at least at later stages of revision, stages he does not yet reach. Such an audience will consider precision of word choice or clarity of imagery to be important. And, Gary will need to become more completely this kind of audience himself. As his sense of audience is informed by these standards, Gary's gifts as a poet may begin to more fully develop and his writing more fully move into poetic discourse.